

Technological Nihilism vs. Natural Law: Science, Morality, and the Law Today

by Peter Augustine Lawler

The conflict between the followers of Jacques Maritain and the followers of John Dewey seems to amount to this: each group accuses the other of promoting education for tyranny. Pragmatism, for the Deweyans, frees human beings from the idea of a fixed human nature to pursue freely our ever-evolving ideas of happiness or fulfillment. So it frees us from fixed moral standards and accepts standards that emerge through the results of scientific habituation and moral experimentation. According to the followers of Maritain, pragmatists are really nihilists: they deny the reality of the natural purposes that shape and limit all human endeavors. So they, in effect, enslave us to the results of technological success, and they deprive us of the educational resources required to resist the high-tech forms of tyranny soon to come. For the followers of Maritain—or the proponents of Thomistic natural law—pragmatism prevents us from educating citizens who can use morality and law to subordinate our technological progress to human good. In the spirit—if not quite according to the letter—of Maritain, I’m going to show that the future of our freedom depends on American education turning to natural law.

If neither morality nor the law can control technology, then what can? One answer (and one I will get around to rejecting) is “nothing”—we are destined to be controlled by technology, and not technology by us. According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, we live in a time with a technological understanding of reality. What is real for us is what can be measured and controlled rationally. What is not rational in that technological sense is not real. So love, virtue, beauty, contemplative thought, and God aren’t real. Our opinions about such matters have been reduced to mere preferences or whims. They correspond to nothing real; they are merely arbitrary products of our obsessive imaginations. Heidegger’s big point is that we can’t control technology with weightless whims or preferences—even if we call them virtues or prin-

ciples—because it's impossible to control something with nothing. Our nihilism guarantees that technology will progress of its own accord, conquering and transforming nature in the efficient maximization of human power. We are destined to be hard at work to free ourselves from nature: that is, to overcome the natural limits to our bodily existences. We aim to bring our evolution under our own control, and not only our means but our ends will be technological. Most of all, we fight against the nature that is out to kill us, to make our most precarious and temporary existences as individuals ever more secure.

We have to admit that sophisticated Americans often talk today as if they were nihilists in this sense, completely under the spell of the technological view of the world. When it comes to morality—to the soul—they are increasingly laid-back and nonjudgmental. They can use empty phrases like “sexual preference” or “Christian values” with straight faces. And they really do believe that matters once fraught with great moral consequences, like whom to have sex with and why, should become matters of moral indifference. Not only should we say, as on *Seinfeld*, “not that there’s anything wrong with that”: we should, deep down, really believe that there’s nothing wrong with that. For us, education for tolerance is increasingly education for a nonjudgmentalism that is indistinguishable from moral yawning.

*What is real for us is what can be measured
and controlled rationally. What is not rational
in that technological sense is not real.*

Our one exception to their moral indifference is health and safety—the only thing technologists know is real for human individuals. Even postmodern professors who say in class that modern science is nothing but another dogma of domination still exercise in the most disciplined and scientific way. The one moral injunction remaining when it comes to sex is to be safe, and our sophisticates clamor, more generally, for a world in which sexual behavior can be severed from all risk, from birth and death. For us, sexual education is little more than teaching the techniques that allow us to perform the biological act without damaging our own or others’ bodies through disease or pregnancy. When it comes to health and safety, not only are they moralists; they’re Puritanical prohibitionists. American law is no longer pro-choice when it comes to helmets and seatbelts; we have lost our freedom to “supersize,” and paranoid fear of secondhand smoke has cost us our right to smoke. And we are just beginning to figure what the law can do to save us from the trans-fatty culture of death by the Oreo cookie. When it comes to health and safety, our sophisticates see growing connections between science, morality,

and law—even as they see less connection when it comes to moral issues that used to be connected to the soul.

In the classroom, we're increasingly nonjudgmental even when it comes to the students' academic performance, and grades continue to inflate. Grade inflation doesn't bother us, since it does the student no physical harm. But the problem is that our students are inflating physically too, and the obesity epidemic is a genuine, measurable health problem. There is a growing consensus that the report card should contain genuinely stern news about the student's body mass; our goal is that no child will be left with an oversized behind. There will be no masking the students' true performance, and the school will expect parents to discipline their kids toward a more risk-free life.

* * *

The main countercultural opposition to the technological view comes from evangelical Christians. They use the biblical or Christian worldview as their antidote to technological nonjudgmentalism or moral indifference. Revelation provides them the moral absolutes to guide them through what would otherwise be a relativistic world. The Bible tells them that abortion, the destruction of embryos for research, and same-sex marriage are wrong, and they claim the right to push for laws that correspond to their Christian worldview. Their worldview seemed to prevail in the recent referenda over same-sex marriage, and it is impossible not to admire the evangelicals' resolve in defending morality in our time. But their prospects for enduring success are slim, because they concede too much to their opponents.

The evangelicals say, in effect, that if it weren't for revelation, the nihilists would be right. Their opponents respond that there is no rational evidence that revelation is real, and in any case the American way is to privatize religion: each individual has a right to his or her religious opinions or preferences or whims, but they cannot be imposed on others through law. What we Americans share in common is the world described by technological reason—the world of the free individual constrained only by concerns about health and safety. That conclusion is one reason more and more evangelical parents withdraw their kids from public schools: they want to save their children from the secularism that they identify with nihilism. For our public schools to win them back, we will have to stop identifying enlightened secularism with pragmatism. Our home-schooling parents have good reason to believe that an educational environment molded by Dewey is no place to learn one's true duties to friends, family, country, and God, and education emptied of natural purposes really amounts to technological nihilism.

A common misunderstanding is that "natural law" is a code phrase for Catholic theology. But for Maritain and other followers of St. Thomas

Aquinas, natural law is what we can know through reason about the functioning of all the animals, including those functions or purposes given to the human animal alone. The followers of Dewey call what we can know through the scientific method “naturalism,” and they quite dogmatically dismiss any account of nature but their own as untrue. Dewey presented himself as a follower of Darwin, and that fact leads our educators to believe that Darwinian natural science provides *the* true or rational account of what human beings are. But as a complete account of human behavior, what we now call evolutionary psychology or sociobiology is really quite questionable. Can understanding human beings as exceedingly clever chimps explain why we have priests, presidents, poets, physicists, and philosophers and the chimps do not?

In his diverse and voluminous writings, where does Dewey account for the unique experiences of the being who knows he will die, the self-conscious mortal?

Maritain points us in the direction of the recovery of a non-nihilistic natural scientist, and our teachers should examine the claims of natural law fairly on their own empirical terms. Dewey’s own account of human experience is obviously more a diversion from than a full account of the truth about being human. In his diverse and voluminous writings, where does Dewey account for the unique experiences of the being who knows he will die, the self-conscious mortal? Pragmatism, in general, is a diversion from the truth expressed by existentialism, and our beginning of a return to natural law is the acknowledgment that pragmatism and existentialism are both partly true. Dewey *wanted* education guided by his thought to become superficial or largely technical, in part to spare students from being moved by the perennial theological and metaphysical questions. But those questions really do emerge, natural-law thinkers claim, from what we really can know about our predicament and promise as human beings. Dewey’s denial that there could be true, weighty, and enduring answers to the fundamental human questions about love and death made him, despite his final intentions and noble work, a nihilist.

* * *

When you remove revelation from the picture, the evangelicals and nihilists (a category that includes pragmatists) agree about reality. The nihilistic view is destined to prevail when it comes to public morality, science, and the law: there are no publicly recognizable limits to technological progress except health and safety. Our public view is that nothing—our merely imaginary views of the word of God—cannot prevail over something—the beneficial reality of technological progress. The

American showdown between the so-called fundamentalists and the secular humanists may actually be more evidence still that Heidegger is right.

Now our technologists tell us that their inevitable enlightened victory over religious fanaticism is part of the new birth of human freedom. Our moral libertarianism, combined with the health, wealth, and freedom produced by technology, gives us the unprecedented opportunity to live “designer” lives. And biotechnology will allow us to enhance or even change what we have been given by nature. More and more designer tools will be at our disposal. Our “menu of choice” will expand, and we, increasingly, will be whatever we want to be.

But the problem is that the technological expansion of choice seems to erode our actual ability to choose. How can we design a life according to some mere preference or whim? How can I choose to be a Christian or Spartan or philosopher if I know so clearly that there’s no foundation to Christianity, the way of the warrior, or the way of the philosopher? Our only real choices will be for health and safety, for maximizing one’s own security and minimizing risk, for maximizing one’s own independence and minimizing one’s dependence on others and on nature. Those choices, of course, will also maximize our dependence on technology. We talk and talk about education for diversity, but actually our tendency is to empty the real moral contents from all non-technological ways of life. That’s because we think we lack the resources to say what’s really true or what’s really noble; we tend to conclude that all the diverse ways of life that resist the domination of technology are equally weightless.

Religion, from this view, will wither away, but not the state. The law will embody our scientific principle of not choosing against health and safety. We sometimes read of the danger of perverse parents using designer biotechnology to get themselves deaf or relatively low-I.Q. children to satisfy some strange whim. But such choices will surely be illegal. Deafness and stupidity will be very avoidable risk factors. Parents ordinarily will, and in fact will be compelled to, take advantage of the latest available genetic enhancements. They will have to choose the best possible prospects for health, longevity, intelligence, strength, and so forth for their children. Parental tyranny over the unborn will be limited to matters of mere preference such as hair and eye color.

Already HMOs are compelling mothers to submit to genetic testing as a condition of paying for their pregnancy, and the pressure is often on—in the name of health and safety—to abort genetically defective fetuses. One result is that Down syndrome babies are disappearing from our country. The benefits of using technology to prevent less-than-perfect births are clear, and we seem to have no real reason to oppose its use. Our experts regard the choice for the Down syndrome child as mere prefer-

ence or whim that we can't afford to humor. The mother who claims to make such a choice out of love can't be trusted, because, our experts tell us, she's choosing for avoidable suffering and premature death.

What may well happen is that today's pro-life Catholics (and Mormons and evangelicals and so forth) will become pro-choice. Everyone else may be choosing to abort and to enhance, but we still want to have kids the old-fashioned way. We want to have unprotected sex and hope and pray for the best. But that approach may well be judged to be filled with unreasonable risks for health and safety. So it may become illegal. It's a burden and danger to us all to have those unenhanced—or relatively stupid and disease-ridden—Catholic and Mormon kids running around. In the name of avoiding risk, we may well have just begun a process of separating sex from procreation, aiming at a world with perfectly safe sex and the healthiest possible babies. But separating sex from reproduction is surely at the expense of our erotic enjoyment, which must depend, in part, on sex being a risky business and on the possibility of dangerous liaisons. Put more positively, human erotic enjoyment depends, in part, on its connection with children and the joys, responsibilities, and uncertainties they bring.

*We talk and talk about education for diversity,
but actually our tendency is to empty the real moral
contents from all nontechnological ways of life.*

Sociobiologists—not to mention Christians—will rightly object that all this new health and safety or individual security will not really make us happy or even make us feel more secure. We can see that already. Childhood, objectively, is safer than ever, but parents are more paranoid than ever. Sophisticated parents are busy eliminating all chance or nature from their kids' overregulated or overscheduled lives. And that trend will continue. The more our existence depends on our technological manipulation, the more our very being depends on our constant effort, and the more we distance ourselves from our natural enjoyments as parents, children, friends, and so forth, the more we will experience ourselves as anxiously contingent beings, or as accidental beings all alone in a fundamentally hostile environment. We will become more and more obsessed with our precarious futures as individuals. The more health and safety we get, the more we will want, and the more we will demand from government and ourselves.

The goal of our technological efforts is to free ourselves from our natural alienation by creating a world in which we are totally at home because we have made it for ourselves. But so far we seem to be more alienated and homeless than ever before. And our inability to free ourselves from alienated insecurity is going to produce new forms of tyranny;

at least it will if we really believe that there is no real standard higher than technological reason that all we Americans can share.

* * *

There's one possibility I haven't mentioned. If biotechnological progress won't really make us less anxious or more at home, then all we need to do is change the way we experience it. We can't completely bring our bodies under our control, but we can control our moods. Moods, according to the technological view, are nothing but chemical reactions, and so we should choose the reaction that makes us feel most comfortable. We have no reason to privilege one mood over another because it's more true. The flawed but real success we've had so far with psychotropic drugs is a glimpse of our progressively more reliably brightened future. Designer moods, much more than designer babies, promise us the freedom from anxious insecurity that we really want.

Mood designing won't achieve that happy result. For one reason, lurking behind all efforts at mood control is a really bad mood. What do we really think human life is like if we really believe that even our moods demand our incessant conscious manipulation, if I really believe that it's impossible to get through the day happily without the right mix of pills or nanobots or whatever? The other animals seem perfectly content with the moods they've been given by nature.

*Lurking behind all efforts at mood control
is a really bad mood.*

But from the perspective of the relationships among science, morality, and the law, the most important point to make is that the pursuit of mood control is bound to produce more tyranny. If moods are nothing more than chemical relations, then by what right can I tell my superiors "no" if they demand that I get myself to the drugstore to become less moody and earn, as a result, much better or consistently excellent student evaluations? If the biotechnological management of moods becomes the key to maintaining a reliably happy and productive workforce, there is no reason, from the technological view, to allow any of your employees any room for conscientious objection to taking the prescribed remedy.

Everything I've said leads to this conclusion: our creeping, selective libertarianism—which is really technological nihilism—points to new forms of tyranny. The only way to resist that tyranny effectively is to show that technological nihilism is untrue. That's the service that Thomistic natural-law thinking can provide for our country. We human beings have been given natural purposes. Some of them we share with the other animals; others are specific to ourselves. We are by nature husbands, wives, parents, children, friends, citizens, and creatures. Our natu-

ral social, political, rational, and religious capabilities give us both distinctive liberties and distinctive responsibilities. We are more, much more, than isolated individuals struggling to secure our accidental existences in a hostile environment.

We have to be able to say that biotechnological mood control is wrong because it makes me less than what I really am by nature; it keeps me from being open to what I can really know of the truth about all things, including the truth about God. Shyness, we read, has already become “social phobia”; it has been “medicalized” into a disabling disorder that can be alleviated by taking selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors such as Prozac or Paxil. People can get the drugs and so have the duty to become more outgoing and friendly. But according to the great Catholic Thomistic novelist Walker Percy, shy people are sometimes shy because they are particularly aware of the “unique unformulability” of the human soul. The truth is that we’re sometimes shy because we’re particularly moved by the truth about being human. Suppressing social anxiety in the name of social effectiveness can also suppress what we really know.

We have to be able to say that abortion is also a negation of our natural human purposes—abortion is bad, of course, for the baby but also for the woman who has one—to be able to choose freely against it in the future. Today’s pro-choice position, as I have explained, will be the foundation of tomorrow’s tyranny.

It’s often said that Thomistic natural-law doctrine is a fancy but fraudulent way of trying to impose anti-choice tyranny upon Americans. Exactly the opposite is the case: it’s the only way we Americans will have to avoid the tyranny soon to come. Our evangelicals, especially, have to understand why that is true. They are on much more solid ground than they think on the moral positions they fight to defend: they often are not just in accord with biblical revelation, but testify to the truth we can see with our own eyes for ourselves about our natures. Our Christians must learn how to talk with our non-Christian citizens about the truth of the good that constitutes their distinctive, transcendent, wonderful, limited, and flawed natures. And our teachers must be allowed the freedom to tell the truth about what we really know about our natures, or not be stuck with identifying secularism with pragmatism or nihilism.

Peter Augustine Lawler is a professor of government at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia. He is the author of Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls; executive editor of Perspectives on Political Science; and a member of the President’s Council on Bioethics.